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CHESS, HISTORY, AND BROADWAY

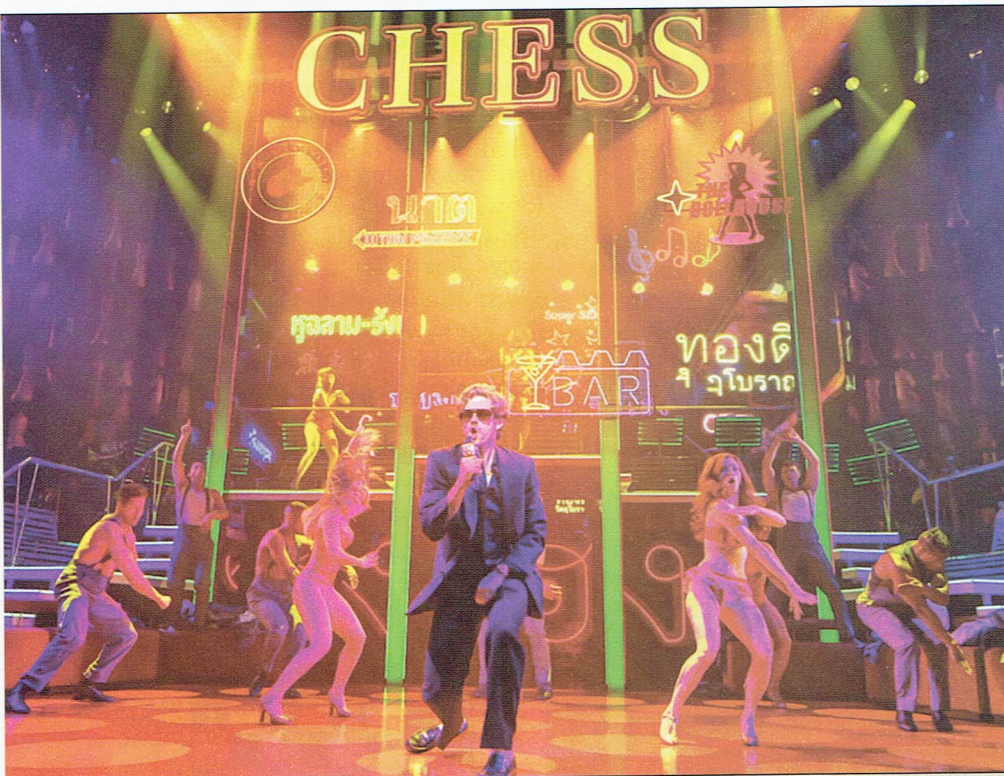
The Long-Forgotten Master Behind Chess's Climactic Checkmate



Jon Jacobs is a Brooklyn-based FIDE Master, chess coach, and award-winning author. He is currently working on an ambitious book exploring the life and career of Bill Goichberg, America's greatest chess tournament organizer. His interview with Goichberg was published in ACM #42.

The Broadway revival of *Chess* has brought fresh attention to an iconic checkmating sequence from the musical's 1980s London debut. Few today are aware that the brilliancy was inspired by a real game played by Paul Felix Schmidt, an Estonian-born International Master who spent three decades living quietly in Pennsylvania, largely outside the public chess spotlight.

● By FM Jon Jacobs



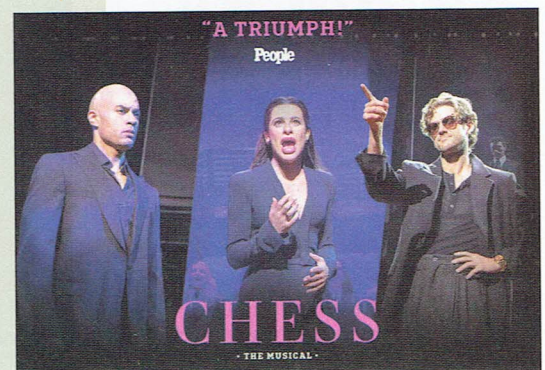
for most of his adult life. The real-life model for the Tim Rice musical's chessboard fireworks was a game played decades earlier in a German cafe by Paul Felix Schmidt. Schmidt could very well be the strongest player you never heard of, unless you happen to be either a World War II-era chess history buff or a native of Estonia.

Born in Estonia in 1916, Schmidt emigrated to the U.S. in 1952 – part of a postwar wave of immigrants from Europe that also included GM Nicholas Rossolimo, Imre Koenig, Povilas Tautvaisas, and future World Correspondence Champion Victor Palciauskas. During and shortly before World War II, Schmidt was among the world's strongest players. He achieved lifetime even scores or plus scores versus at least five near-World Champions and World Champions: 4½ points out of 7 tournament games against Bogolyubov, 7½ out of 15 against fellow Estonian Paul Keres, draws in his only encounters with Max Euwe and Reuben Fine, and a win in his only game against Salo Flohr, according to Chessgames.com. Chessmetrics

Chess, the theatrical musical centered around a World Chess Championship match during the height of the Cold War, began its latest revival on Broadway in October and is slated to run through mid-June. Even if you never saw the show or heard its soundtrack, you've probably guessed that what's been pulling legions of buyers to box offices and record stores for almost four decades isn't a burning need to witness the action play out on the 64 squares. The original 1986 production became a smash hit and its concept album featuring music by the Swedish band ABBA went platinum more than a year before the stage debut, on the strength of a complex story line blending romance, geopolitics, rivalries and betrayals on and away from the chessboard, and agonized personal choices.

You might be surprised, however, to learn that the London performances some 40 years ago depicted an over-the-board chess brilliancy inspired by a world-class player who lived in America

A "must-watch" for any chess aficionado - Chess musical on Broadway





ranked Schmidt No. 9 in the world at his peak in December 1943.

What is Schmidt's connection with *Chess*, the musical? The diagrams below make it clear. Position 1 appeared on the board in the aforementioned coffee-house game Schmidt played in Heidelberg in 1946.

**Paul F. Schmidt
Paul R. Schmidt**

Informal game, Heidelberg 1946



Position 2 appeared on giant screens above the stage in the 1986 production in London's West End.

**"Anatoly Sergievsky"
"Leonid Viigand"**

(contestants in fictional WCC match)
Composed game by IM William Hartston, adapted from P.F. Schmidt - P.R. Schmidt



Both culminated in the following stunning denouement (with only difference on move 4 by Black):
1. ♖h6+!! ♔xh6 2. hxg6+ ♔g5
3. ♖h5+!! ♔xh5 4. f4+ ♖xe2/♗xe2
5. ♖f6+ ♔h6 6. ♖h1+ ♔g7 7. ♖e8+ ♗xe8
8. ♖xh7+ ♔f6 9. ♖xf7 mate.

I saw *Chess* performed in both London and New York in the 1980s, as well as its current Broadway version. (The current production does not display the mating combination or any other on-board chess moves.) In the decades since it

premiered, revivals have been staged in Australia, Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Hungary, Germany, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan, Norway, Russia, Austria, England, and various U.S. cities.

I have long associated the checkmate sequence from *Chess* with the declaration, "I get my kicks ABOVE the waistline, Sunshine!" That sentence was spat out by the Bobby Fischer-like protagonist to rebuff a hooker's bid to seduce him in the song, "One Night in Bangkok" – the biggest hit single that emerged from the *Chess* concept album and musical.

The nine-move forced mate is the deciding moment in a fictional World Chess Championship match that forms the crux of both the show's Cold War plot and the romance story woven into it. The critical position that I later tried and failed to solve with board and pieces in front of me made a deep and lasting impression. Told at the time that the English IM William Hartston had been paid to compose the combination, I wrongly assumed that was the whole story. Until the day a position from one of the countless "Move of the Day" chess groups appeared on my social media feed... and, BAM!, I recognized the essential features of the "kicks ABOVE the waistline" brilliancy I had observed in that West End theater so long ago.



▲ The only chess book by Paul Schmidt featuring a drawing of Paul Keres on the cover.

◀ Paul Felix Schmidt analyzing with his favourite chess set, Easter 1974.

But the game details on the social media page proved wrong in a crucial respect. While the winner was correctly identified as Paul Schmidt – my first time hearing of him – his opponent was named as Kurt Richter, a well-known German master and author from the World War II era.

That identification, which also appears in several books including Vukovic's 1965 classic *The Art of Attack in Chess*, was incorrect. The most credible accounts attribute the position to a game between Schmidt and his father, Paul Roderich Schmidt. According to a 2016 article on the Chess History and Literature Society website crediting the esteemed German chess historian Michael Negele, the game fragment was published by Kurt Richter in two German newspapers in January 1947 and appeared in the German chess magazine *Schach-Echo* in 1954. Similar accounts reportedly ran in the English magazine *Chess* in 1947 and the Finnish magazine *Suomen Shakki* in 1972 – the latter citing personal correspondence between Paul F. Schmidt and Finnish grandmaster Eero Böök (1910-1990).

Schmidt died in 1984, some two years before *Chess* debuted in London. His indirect contribution to the show remains almost entirely unknown to the chess world. He is nowhere mentioned in the 98-page post-production book by IM Hartston, who Tim Rice consulted for chess-related details in the script and staging.

"William Hartston was a chess advisor in the work on *Chess*," Lars Grahn wrote in 2007 in the Swedish magazine *Tidskrift för Schack*. "When you read his book *Chess, The Making of a Musical* (Pavilion Books, 1986), you can easily get the impression



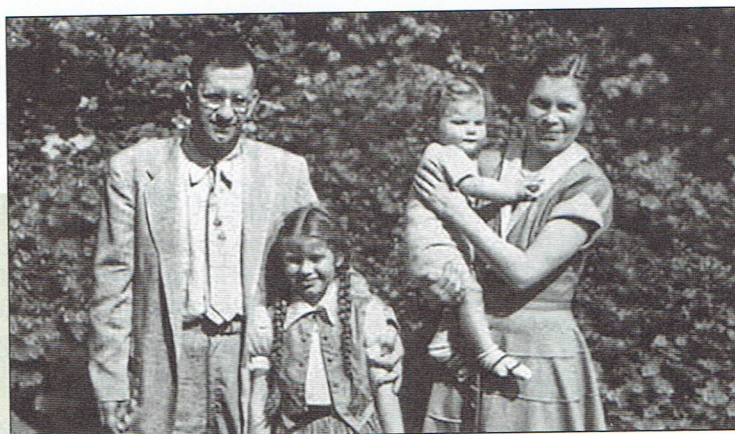
that it was he who constructed the game from beginning to end. But it is probably not entirely wrong to give Paul Schmidt a large part of the credit for the final climax.” (Translated from Swedish by Google Translate)

Paul Schmidt resided in Germany from 1939 to 1951, relocating there immediately after the 1939 Chess Olympiad in Buenos Aires where he had played 3rd board for his native Estonia. Throughout the war he competed in numerous high-level chess events in Germany and countries it controlled such as Austria and Poland. We can surmise that he viewed Germany’s Nazi government as less threatening than the Soviet Union, whose forcible takeover of the formerly independent Estonian republic began while that Olympiad was taking place. FIDE awarded him an International Master title in 1950.

After earning a doctorate in chemistry from Heidelberg University, Schmidt emigrated to America. He arrived in the U.S. with his wife and daughter in March of 1952 after a brief stay in Canada. The family settled in Philadelphia, where Paul Schmidt had obtained a job at Temple University’s Research Institute, “after an investigation to prove that neither he, nor my mother, were involved with Nazi organizations during the war,” wrote his daughter, Eva Regina Magacs. “The move to the United States effectively ended my father’s chess career, but it did great things for his developing profession as a physical chemist.” Magacs and historian Michael Negele co-authored the biography book, *Paul Felix Schmidt: A Winning Formula*, published in 2017 by Exzelsior Verlag.

He soon advanced to a position at Philco Corp., an early manufacturer of batteries, radios and TV sets. In 1959 he jumped to Westinghouse, eventually heading a semiconductor research group of 17 people. Six years later, at age 49, he moved to AT&T Bell Labs in Allentown, PA, where he continued to work until retiring in 1982. His work at Bell Labs spawned many patents and at least one award from the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) for outstanding research in nuclear radiation effects. His research helped advance scientific knowledge of electrochemistry and anodic oxidation of silicon and neutron activation analysis,

Paul Felix, Eva Regina, Alma Irene, and Eva Schmidt. Friends Hospital Gardens, Philadelphia, Spring 1954.



according to his Wikipedia biography.

Along with English, Schmidt maintained fluency in German, Estonian, and Russian, and raised his family “culturally German,” Eva wrote. “We spoke German at home and often got German books as gifts to read on birthdays and Christmas... we were allowed no television, and I naturally craved to watch all the shows the other children were talking about at school.”

As his corporate scientific career prospered, the family – who had “next to nothing” upon coming to America according to Eva – steadily upgraded their lifestyle. They lived in increasingly nice homes in the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia suburbs, owned a vacation cottage, and traveled in the U.S., Europe, and the Caribbean.

While Schmidt remained interested in chess, his scientific work effectively demoted his chess activity to little more than a hobby. He withdrew not only from the world chess arena, but never competed in U.S. national-level tournaments or matches. Eva recalls her father finishing his evenings by replaying chess games from a book or magazine – but only after studying his scientific journals. He and his wife also regularly engaged in duplicate bridge, which enjoyed a vogue among their peers in the 1970s.

His favorite chess set at home had been commissioned many years earlier by his father. Hand-made of birch wood and ivory, its design represented a medieval religious confrontation that right-wing scholars later styled a “clash of civilizations”: the white king was topped with the usual cross, but the ebony king sported not a cross but a half-crescent.

Schmidt did enter several U.S. local tournaments including a Middle Atlantic Regional team championship and gave simultaneous exhibitions for co-workers at Bell Labs and at the Allentown Chess Club. He also gave at least one exhibition beyond U.S. shores, facing five of Bermuda’s best players. Near the end of his life, in 1983/84 he played in and won a Keres memorial postal chess tournament among Estonian players. That event was renamed the “Paul Keres/Paul Schmidt Memorial Correspondence Tournament,” according to his biography.

His last US Chess rating was 2358. Although among the first group of players awarded FIDE titles in 1950, his name is absent from FIDE rating records because international ratings did not exist before 1970.

My friend Andy Kalotay knew Paul Schmidt while working at Bell Labs from 1968 to 1973. They contested many chess games through telephone calls, said Kalotay, who placed 12th in the 1966 U.S. Open and played for the Canadian team in the 1966 Chess Olympiad in Havana. “He was in Allentown, I was in Holmdel (NJ), and the phone was free,” Andy told me. “We met in person only once, when I visited him in Allentown. He was a very strong player, but I managed to hold my own every now and then. ... Unfortunately, I didn’t keep score.”

Among many European and American chess masters Schmidt kept in touch with was the GM and author Ludek Pachman, whom he hosted at his Allentown home during a 1977 visit. Wikipedia states that he “regularly” visited GM Reuben Fine in New York, but uncharacteristically cites no source for that claim, and other references to such a friendship are hard to come by. (The daughter’s family narrative in *Paul Felix Schmidt: A Winning Formula* contains no mention of Fine.)



Aside from competition, Schmidt made a modest mark as a chess author. His one book, *How Chess Masters Think*, remains highly regarded today. Published before he came to America, it went through five German editions from 1949 through 1985 and finally a 1988 English translation by IM Eric Tangborn published by Chess Enterprises. He also contributed analysis of a few top-level games for *Chess Life* and *Players Chess News*. For example, March 1973 *Chess Life* contains his brief article commenting on three positions from the Fischer-Spassky Match of the Century. The October 1983 issue contains three-plus pages of Schmidt's very instructive analysis of the important game Mikhailchishin-Kasparov from the 1981 Soviet Championship. And Schmidt analyzed Karpov-Spassky, Tilburg 1980, in a 1982 article in *Players Chess News*.

In 1983, approximately one year after retiring from Bell Labs, Paul Schmidt was diagnosed with cancer. "The disease was doubtless a product of his years of research on radioactive substances – a possibility he always denied, such was his dedication to his work," his daughter Eva wrote. He died in August 1984, 11 days after the birth of his grandson.

I wonder how he would have felt had he lived two years longer and seen his brilliancy replayed on a screen above the stage in a hit musical?

Notable Games of Paul Felix Schmidt

Born in Estonia in 1916, by 1933 Paul Schmidt had become one of the country's leading chess players, placing 1st or 2nd in a number of significant tournaments in Tallinn, the capital city. At the beginning of 1936 he won his first of two national championships; later that year he drew a 7-game match with his chief rival Paul Keres. The following year he won an international tournament in Parnu, Estonia, ahead of Keres, Flohr, and Stahlberg. Three of his greatest triumphs came in 1941: 1st place in a German national championship; tied 1st-2nd with Alekhine in a strong Krakow/Warsaw tournament

WHERE PAUL SCHMIDT'S COMBINATION FITS IN CHESS'S STORY LINE

Chess is a musical built around an intricate story conceived by Tim Rice – the lyricist behind mega-hits like *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita* – and put to music by the Swedish band ABBA. The fictional plot is steeped in Cold War machinations that surrounded the Fischer-Spassky and Karpov-Korchnoi World Chess Championship matches. The story explores a fluid matrix of national allegiances, romantic attachments, family loyalties, and chessboard rivalries, among a brash but dethroned American champion loosely modeled after Bobby Fischer; his fictional Russian successor who defected after gaining the world title; and a new Soviet challenger for the throne. (The 1980s New York version and most later productions significantly modified the plot, such as by altering the ending or removing an important character.)

In the original London production the various plot elements all come to a head during a World Championship match in Bangkok between the two Russians. The defending champion (the defector) is told he can win the release of his lover's father from a gulag by losing the match. Meanwhile the American former champion, attending the match as a journalist, reveals a "bust" he discovered in a position the challenger has been playing into. That bust is the forced mating attack dreamed up in real life by Paul Schmidt in 1946 and adapted by IM William Hartston for the show.

The moves and starting positions of both the real-life and staged versions of the nine-move sacrificial combination can be found in our main story. Hartston in his book *Chess, the Making of a Musical*, even published two hypothetical game scores he composed that conclude with that sequence of moves. Hartston's first version came out of a Sicilian Defense. But the plot and dialogue of *Chess* evolved to require a song lyric that mentions the game's opening. "And Sicilian has too many sibilants to sound good when sung," Hartston explained. So he composed a second game that begins from a King's Indian Defense. It's referred to in the song, "Talking Chess."

organized by the Nazi butcher Hans Frank; and a crushing 3½/4 match win over Klaus Junge (another world-class player who is largely forgotten today). His final published games in the database are from 1950.

"Paul Schmidt's special talent was his extraordinary combinatorial ability. Only a few chess players can boast of having played two 'immortal' games," wrote Bodo von Dehn, a German-Latvian chess composer and historian, in a 1954 issue of *Schach-Echo*. The second "immortal" that von Dehn referred to was the Heidelberg café game against Schmidt's father whose finale inspired a key moment in the Tim Rice musical. The first is annotated below.

C13

Paul Felix Schmidt

Heinz Nowarra

Krakow/Warsaw 1941

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙g5 dxe4 5.♘xe4 ♙e7 6.♙xf6 ♙xf6 7.♘f3 ♘d7 8.♚d2 ♙e7 9.0-0 c6 10.♙d3 ♚c7 11.♗he1 b6 12.♙b1 ♙b7?! Better is 12...h6, to prevent White's next move.

13.♘eg5! The start of a well-conceived assault. Today such a conception would have been prepared far in advance with electronic assistance. Eighty-five years ago, Schmidt had neither theory nor engine at his side, but conjured it all at the board.

Amazingly, Black is already lost here, according to Stockfish. The natural defense 13...♘f6 is demolished by either 14.♗xe6! (or 14.♘xf7! ♙xf7 15.♘g5+ ♙g8 16.♘xe6 ♚d7 17.g4) 14...fxe6 15.♘xe6 ♚d6 16.♘xg7+ ♙d8 17.♘g5!, in either case with a decisive attack.

13...h6



14.♘xf7!! The other sacrificial continuation 14.♘xe6 fxe6 15.♙g6+ ♙d8 16.♗xe6 ♘f8 17.d5! likewise yields



a winning attack, according to engine analysis too lengthy to reproduce here.

14...♙xf7 15.♖xe6! ♗xe6 Declining the offer avails not: 15...♜f6 16.♗de1 ♗he8 17.♙c4 ♜d5 18.♖e2 b5 19.♜e5+! and White will either deliver a quick checkmate after 19...♗xe6 20.♖g4+, or will recoup his material investment with interest if the black king retreats instead of taking the rook.

16.♙c4+ ♗f6 17.♖e1?! More effective was 17.♖e2 ♖d6 18.♜h4 g6 19.♖e1 or 19.♖f3+.

17...♜f8



18.♖c3! ♗g6? Better hopes of survival were offered by 18...♙c8 19.♜e5 h5 – although engines still see White as better despite being behind a full rook and a piece (!).

19.♖d3+ ♗f6 20.♜e5 ♙c8 21.♖f3+ ♙f5 22.g4 ♖c8 23.gxf5 h5 24.♜g6 The alternatives 24.♖g1 or 24.♖e4 would force checkmate within Stockfish's calculation horizon. But it hardly matters here: Black is toast no matter what.

24...♙b4



25.♖e6+! ♜xe6 26.fxe6+ ♗xg6 27.♙d3+ Black resigned

A stunning display; one part Tal and one part Adolf Anderssen.

The next game is Schmidt's only encounter with an American that I could find in the ChessBase Big Database 2026. He played in Europe against Rossolimo, Koenig, and Tautvaisas, but only before those players had emigrated to the U.S.

A tense middlegame gives way to an instructive rook ending that shows even world-class players blow basic technical challenges. (A modern example, albeit perhaps a less basic one, is Aronian-Carlsen, Tal Memorial, Moscow 2006. Although several years before his world title run, 15-year-old Magnus was rated just shy of 2700 when he lost that drawn ending of R+P vs. R.)

D12

Reuben Fine

Paul Felix Schmidt

Chess Olympiad, Stockholm 1937

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♜f3 ♜f6 4.e3 ♙f5 5.♜c3 e6 6.♜h4 ♙e4 7.f3 ♙g6 8.♖b3 ♖c7 9.♙d2 ♙e7 10.♜xg6 hxg6 11.0-0-0 ♜bd7 12.♙e2 The only instance of this move in the database. Modern-day grandmasters mostly have chosen 12.cxd5 or 12.♗b1, with strong results for White in either case.

12...dxc4 13.♙xc4 ♜b6 14.g3 White could retain his bishop only by letting the h-pawn go. He would have sufficient compensation after 14.♙f1 ♗xh2 15.♗xh2 ♖xh2 16.a4!? ♖d6 17.♗b1 ♖b4, according to Stockfish.

14...♜xc4 The sharper 14...a5 was worth consideration. For example, 15.♙e2 a4 16.♖c2 a3 17.b3 ♜bd5 18.♜xd5 ♜xd5 19.♗b1 ♖b6. **15.♖xc4 ♜d5 16.e4 ♜xc3 17.♙xc3 0-0-0 18.♗b1 ♗h5 19.f4 ♗dh8 20.d5** Stronger was 20.♖a4 ♗b8 and only then 21.d5 exd5 22.exd5 ♗xd5 23.♗xd5 cxd5 24.♗c1 ♖d8 25.♙xg7, with advantage. If now, 25...♗xh2?, then 26.♙e5+ ♗a8 27.♗c7+-.

20...cxd5 21.♖a4



21...♖c6 22.♖xa7 ♙c5 23.♖a8+ ♗d7 24.exd5 exd5 25.♖a5 d4? Instead, 25...♗xh2 would hold the balance.

26.♙xd4 ♖e4+ 27.♗a1 ♙xd4 28.♖b4 ♗c8 29.♗he1 ♙xb2+ 30.♖xb2



Reuben Fine

♖f5? This should lose for Black. The only reasonable defence was 30...♖a4, keeping the White queen off a3.

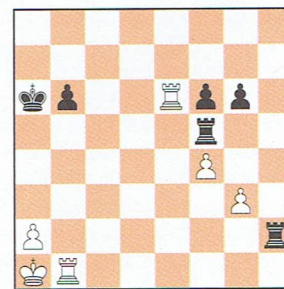
31.♗e5? Missing his chance for the full point. He could have obtained a winning attack after 31.g4! ♖xg4 and either 32.♖a3 or 32.♖d4. Diverting the black queen to g4 was necessary to prevent the defense ...♖f6.

After the move played White retains the initiative, but Schmidt now demonstrates his skill at defense – until his 39th move.

31...♖f6 32.♗c1+ ♗b8 33.♗b1 b6! Better than 33...♖c6 or 33...♖a6 34.♗e7. **34.♖d4 ♗a7 35.♗e7+ ♗a6!** The tempting 35...♗a8? would leave Black three pawns behind after 36.♖xf6 gxf6 37.♗xf7 ♗xh2 38.♗xf6 ♗g2 39.♗fxb6, threatening ♗a6 mate.

36.♖xf6 gxf6 37.♗xf7 ♗f5 38.♗e7 If 38.♗b2, then both 38...♗e8 or 38...♗d8 should hold.

38...♗xh2 39.♗e6



39...♗a5?? An inexplicable lapse! Either 39...♗a7 40.♗bxb6 (40.♗exb6 ♗xa2+ 41.♗xa2 ♗a5+=) 40...♗a5, or 39...♗a5 40.♗exb6 ♗c5 would hold the draw with little difficulty.

40.♗exb6+ ♗a7 41.♗b7+ ♗a8

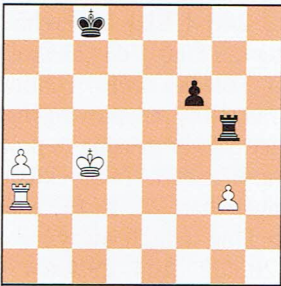


42.♖7b2?? Wrong rook! White wins after 42.♖b8+ ♔a7 43.♖1b7+ ♔a6 44.♖b2 ♖h1+ 45.♖b1 ♖xb1+ 46.♔xb1 ♔a7 47.♖b3. Unlike in the preceding note, here Black lacks the active rook on its 7th rank, leaving the White king free to advance and support its pawns.

42...♖h7 43.♖b3 ♔a7 44.a3 g5 45.fxg5 ♖xg5 46.♖b4 ♔a6 47.♖1b3 ♖hg7 48.♔b2 ♖g4 49.♖xg4 ♖xg4 50.♖f3 ♖g6?? Another game-changing lapse. Never voluntarily accept a passive rook! White could make no progress after either 50...f5 or 50...♔b7.

51.♔c3 ♔b7 52.♔d4 ♔c7 53.♔d5?? Instead, 53.♔e4! would make the black rook bear the full burden of protecting his f-pawn. White could then eventually win the f-pawn in return for his a-pawn, achieving a won R+P vs. R ending with the black king cut off from the remaining white passed pawn. For example: 53...♖g5 (53...♔d6 54.♔f5 ♖h6 55.♖e3+-) 54.♖d3! ♖h5 55.♔f4 ♖a5 56.a4 ♖xa4+ 57.♔f5 ♖a6 58.♔g6 ♖b6 59.♖f3+-.

53...♔d7 54.a4 ♖g5+ 55.♔c4 ♔c8 56.♖a3



56...♔b7?? This time Black permits his king to be cut out of the action. The alternatives 56...♔d7; 56...♔c7; or 56...♖a5 all draw. For example, 56...♖a5 57.♔b4 ♖f5! 58.a5 ♖f2 59.♔c5 f5 60.♔b6 f4 61.♖c3+ ♔b8 62.♖d3 ♖b2+ 63.♔c6 fxg3 64.♖xg3 ♔a7=.

57.a5?? 57.♔d4! ♔c6 58.♔e4 ♖a5 59.♖d3+- would win as in the note to White's move 53.

57...♔c6! Wisely avoiding 57...♔a6?? 58.♔d4 ♖e5 59.♖f3 ♖g5 60.♖xf6+ ♔xa5 61.♖f3 ♔b5 62.♔e4 ♔c6 63.♖d3+-.

58.♖f3 ♖xa5 59.♖xf6+ ♔d7 60.♔d4 ♔e7 61.♖f3 ♔e6 The players agreed to a **draw** now that the black king cannot be kept away from the pawn's path. If 62.♖f1 ♖a3 the white rook must cease guarding the f-file, allowing ... ♔f5.

In a messy but interesting game, Schmidt takes risks and succeeds in bamboozling a formidable opponent. FIDE nominated Salo Flohr the same year to challenge Alekhine for the world title (the match didn't happen, for economic reasons associated with the approaching world war). Replaying this game gives the impression Black was toying with his opponent like a cat playing with a mouse.

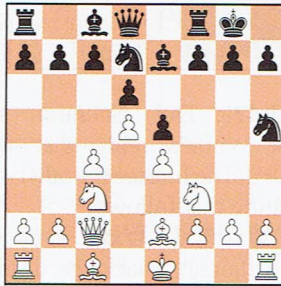
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Salo Flohr

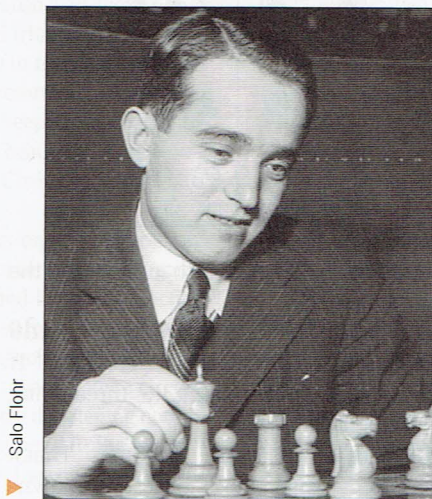
Paul Felix Schmidt

Parnu 1937

1.c4 e5 2.♖c3 ♖f6 3.♖f3 ♖c6 4.e3 d6 5.d4 ♖e7?! Black's setup appears passive: after White's next two moves engines award the first player a large edge due to his space advantage. But Schmidt adroitly lures Flohr into a tactical swamp. 6.d5 ♖b8 7.e4 ♖bd7 8.♖e2 0-0 9.♖c2 ♖h5! An invitation to complications – which White obligingly accepts.



10.♖xe5!? Not bad in itself. But White seems to enter this path this aiming to win a pawn, which isn't necessarily valid. 10...♖xe5 11.♖xh5 ♖xc4 12.♖b5?!



Salo Flohr

Although Black's now backward c-pawn promises White a long-term plus, it was prudent to complete development before targeting that weak point.

12...a6 An alternative is 12...c6, with the same idea.

13.♖xc4 axb5 14.♖xb5 f5 15.♖f3 b6 16.♖b3? The surprising 16.e5! would have secured a big advantage by short-circuiting Black's effort to open the e- and f-files. If 16...dxe5?? 17.d6. Or 16...♖a6 17.♖b3 dxe5?? 18.d6+.

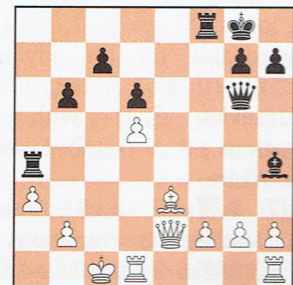
16...fxe4 17.♖xe4 ♖h4 18.♖f3? Now Black obtains the attack he was angling for since move 9. Castling also looks dangerous in light of 18.0-0 ♖xf2+!. However, White can emerge with dynamic equality after 19.♖xf2 ♖xf2 20.♖xh7+ ♔xh7 21.♔xf2 ♖h4+ 22.♖g3 ♖d4+ 23.♖e3 ♖xd5.

18...♖e8+ 19.♖e3 ♖d7 20.a3 If 20.0-0, then 20...♖xf3! 21.gxf3 ♖f7 also favors Black. A possible continuation is 22.♖d2 ♖h3 23.♔h1 ♖h5 24.♖g1 ♖xf2 25.♖g5 ♖f7 and White must return an exchange since his rook on g5 is trapped and freeing it with 26.f4? ♖f5 would give the black bishops too much scope.

The white king soon migrates to the queenside. It's no surprise that it will become just as insecure on that side of the board.

20...♖a5 21.♖d3 ♖b5 22.♖d2 ♖g6 23.0-0-0 ♖a4 24.♖e2 To avoid what follows, Stockfish recommends the terrible-looking 24.b3. You know you're in trouble when that's the best alternative the engine gives you!

24...♖xe2 25.♖xe2



25...♖xf2! 26.♖d2 Taking the bishop 26.♖xf2 would lose to 26...♖xf2 27.♖xf2 ♖c4+ 28.♔d2 ♖c2+ 29.♔e3 ♖e4+ 30.♔d2 ♖c2 mate.

26...♖e4 27.♖b5 ♖d4 28.♖e2 ♖xd5 The rest is just mopping up.

29.♖c3 ♖df5 30.g3 d5 31.♖hf1 ♖e3+ 32.♖d2 ♖c6+ 33.♔b1 ♖xf1 34.♖xe3 ♖xd1+ 35.♖xd1 ♖c4 36.♖f4 d4



37. ♖g4 ♗d5 38. ♘c2 c5 39. ♘d2 ♗e4 40. ♗d7 ♖e8 White resigned

Although not the most precisely played among Schmidt's 15 encounters with his chief Estonian rival Paul Keres, the next game is surely the most entertaining. Does it most resemble chess of the 19th century (Morphy), the 20th (Tal), or 21st (Stockfish, Leela, et al)? You decide.

A22

Paul Keres

Paul Felix Schmidt

Match 1936

1. c4 ♘f6 2. ♘c3 e5 3. f4?! The two big-league sluggers waste nary a moment getting down to business!

3... e4 Aiming for a cramping pawn to hinder White's development, as in the Falkbeer Countergambit. Instead, 3... exf4 4. d4 d5 is the engine's preferred response.

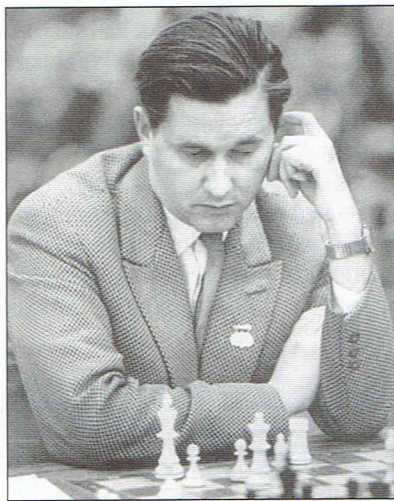
4. ♗c2 d5 5. cxd5 ♘f5



6. ♗b3?! Keres falls in with Black's plans by chasing pawns while conceding a lead in development. The straightforward 6. e3 is less boring than it looks: 6... ♘xd5 7. ♘xe4 (the only reasonable try for advantage) ♘b4 8. ♔f2! (if 8. a3 ♘xe3! 9. ♗a4+ ♘c6 10. axb4 ♘xf1 with great complications.) 8... 0-0 9. ♘e2, with an edge for White.

6... ♘bd7 7. ♗xb7 ♘c5 Better is 7... ♖b8, leading to variations like 8. ♗a6 ♘c5 9. ♗a5 ♘d5 10. ♘a4 ♘d3+! 11. exd3 ♘b4 12. ♗xa7 exd3 13. a3 ♖a8 14. ♗d4 ♖xa4 15. ♗xg7 ♘d7!! 16. ♗xf7+ ♗e7+ 17. ♗xe7+ ♘xe7 with decisive advantage for Black, whose piece activity far outweighs his three-pawn deficit.

8. ♗b3 0-0 Sharper was 8... ♖b8 9. ♗d1 ♘h5, when White would have nothing better than 10. g3 ♘xf4!, with overwhelming compensation for a pawn.



Paul Keres

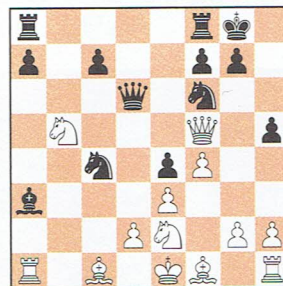
9. e3 ♘b6 10. ♘ge2 h5 11. ♗b5 ♗e7 12. b4!?



12... ♘xb4?! Did Schmidt simply overlook White's reply that wins a piece? Or did he foresee the otherworldly combination that follows?

13. d6! ♗xd6 14. ♗xf5 ♘c4 15. a3 ♘xa3 Although Black is dead lost, it would be wrong to say "hopeless," because White's king in the center creates swindle potential.

16. ♘b5?



16... ♘xc1!! The only chance to turn the game around.

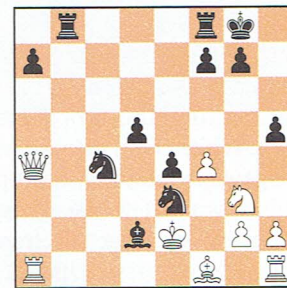
17. ♘xd6 ♘xd2+ 18. ♘d1 cxd6 19. ♗b5?! Better was 19. ♗g5. If 19... ♘xe3, then 20. ♘g3!, threatening ♘f5, is hard to meet.

19... ♘g4! 20. ♘g3 Although Black has only one piece and two pawns

for a queen, his activity is now so great that engines say White should return the queen with 20. ♗xc4 ♘xe3+ 21. ♘xd2 ♘xc4+ 22. ♘e1, keeping a tiny advantage.

20... ♘gx3+ 21. ♘e2 Chances are fully equal(!), in the engines' assessment.

21... ♖ab8 22. ♗a4 Or 22. ♗g5 ♘c3 23. ♖a2 ♘f6 24. ♗xh5 d5 with hair-raisingly dynamic equality, in the view of both Stockfish 17 and Deep Fritz 14. 22... d5



23. ♖a2? Necessary was 23. ♘h5, maintaining equal chances. But, extra queen or not, it's hard to imagine any human with White (even the great Paul Keres) tiptoeing through this minefield to come out alive.

23... ♘c3 24. h3 ♖b1 25. ♘h5? After the better 25. ♗c6 ♖d8 26. ♘xe4 dxe4 27. ♗xe4, Black could continue his winning attack by redeploying his bishop to b6 after calmly pausing to protect his e3 knight: 27... ♖b3!! (a Stockfish "find" far stronger than 27... ♖e1+, which lets the white king wriggle away.)

A) If 28. ♔f2 ♘d4 29. ♘xc4 ♘xc4+ 30. ♔f1 ♖e3 (30... ♖a3 also wins.) 31. ♗c6 ♘b6 32. ♗xc4 ♖d1+ 33. ♔f2 ♖xh1!, followed by an unpreventable discovered check winning the queen.

B) 28. g3 ♖a5 29. ♘g2 ♘b6-+.

25... ♖fb8 26. ♔f2 ♘e1+ 27. ♘g1 ♘xf1 28. ♖a1



28... ♘f2+! 29. ♔xf2 ♖8b2+ 30. ♘g1 ♘fe3+ White resigned before the next 31... ♖g2 mate.